

Detailed analyses of Persuasive Essays in *Criterion*[®]

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Criterion[®]における主張文トピックの詳細分析

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Summary : This paper analyzes persuasive essays provided in the *Criterion*[®] service, an online writing tool developed by Educational Testing Service, as part of the process of examining how essay writing can develop or assess students' writing skills in American educational institutions. Analyses of each persuasive essay topic based on the dichotomy of personal/social topics, the degree of value judgment, the presence/absence of specific target readers, and the presence of degree questions, clearly reveal the transition from the elementary to the advanced writing which requires high level of value judgments, more holistic arguments and abstract philosophical thinking about a higher ratio of social topics.

Key Words : *Criterion*[®], persuasive essay, writing skills

要旨 : この論文では、English Testing Service により開発された英語ライティング指導ツール、*Criterion*[®]で提供されているトピックのうち、主張文を分析する。これは米国の教育機関でライティングのトピックがどのように学生の書く能力を伸ばし、評価しようとしているのかを調べるプロセスの一環である。各トピックを、個人性・社会性、高度な価値判断の必要性、説得すべき特定の相手の有無、そして程度を明示した意見を求めているかという点から、それぞれのトピックを分析した結果、学年が上がるにつれ、高度なライティングへと移行していることが明らかになった。それは社会的問題について、高い価値判断が求められ、そして高い知的レベルに基づいたより包括的な議論と抽象的で哲学的な思考が求められるライティングである。

キーワード : *Criterion*[®], 主張文, ライティング能力

1. Introduction

With an increasing demand for communicative competence in English due to globalization, it is increasingly important to improve Japanese students' speaking and writing skills by developing their critical thinking abilities. However, Japanese learners of English often have difficulty writing effective essays in English partly because of a lack of critical thinking training and unfamiliarity with essay topics.

As the first step toward creating effective lists of independent essay topics to develop English learners' abilities to think logically and express their ideas effectively in English, the previous paper (Taoka : To appear) analyzed more than four hundred topics provided by *Criterion*[®], an online writing tool. However, there were some essay topics with categorization problems, which the previous paper dealt with by recategorizing them into six categories. This paper focuses on one of these categories, the persuasive type, which is arguably the most important part of essay writing in American educational institutions.

2. Recategorized Six Modes of Writing in *Criterion*[®]

Criterion[®] has been developed by ETS (English Testing Service), a prestigious, international institution, with an aim to help students improve their writing skills through automated instant feedback on grammar, spelling, and so on, while reducing the workload of essay instructors by saving time and energy to check on the contents and styles of students' essays.

The *Criterion*[®] service has more than four hundred topics, ranging from ones for grades 4-12 to those for college students including those wishing to pursue their study at a graduate level. The 4th-5th Grade categories are for elementary school children, the 6th-9th Grade categories for junior high school students, and the 10th-12th Grade categories for senior high school students, and College Preparatory, 1st year, and 2nd year are for college students. TOEFL is for non-native students wishing to study at college level, while GRE is for those who seek education in the graduate level.

There are several modes of writing such as descriptive essays and compare-and-contrast essays in each level, with each topic indicated by its mode. However, there are some topics with categorizational problems, and thus the previous paper recategorized those topics into more logical, and proper ones, reducing the number of modes of writing (nine categories) to six.

These six categories are (1) cause-and-effect essays that explain how a thing influences another, why things happen, or what would happen as a result, (2) compare-and-contrast essays that describe similarities and differences between two things, (3) descriptive essays that explain what something is like and looks like, or what purpose it serves, (4) narrative essays that tell fantasy stories or describe one's own life experiences, (5) process essays that explain a procedure, or instruct readers in how to do something, and (6) persuasive essays that discuss the value/importance of something, should-or-should-not-do or good-or-bad arguments, as well as persuade readers to accept a certain idea or take a certain action.

It is made clear from the previous analysis that persuasive essays, which are opinion-based as opposed to fact-based, appear from elementary through college-level education. Even elementary school children are given persuasive essay topics in balance with the other essay categories. At college levels, most of the topics belong to the persuasive type, illustrating an emphasis on expressing one's own opinions with logical and convincing explanations.

Therefore, this paper focuses on the persuasive-type essay topics, analyzing them by further categorizing persuasive essays according to whether topics have personal or social elements and other features, to examine how topic contents actually change with the advancement of students' grades.

3. Personal Topics and Social Topics

One of the dimensions from which all the topics in *Criterion*[®] are analyzed is whether each topic is a personal topic (abbreviated as P in Table 1) or a social one (abbreviated as S in Table 1). It will be a good start to define as personal topics those on which learners can write from the subjective points of view, including their preferences (such as their favorite TV programs, and persons that they admire), and then define as social topics those that require students to discuss social issues from the objective points of view.

Typical personal topics are often found in the narrative and descriptive essay categories. The following are examples of topics taken from the 4th grade :

Example Topic 1 : Castle (Narrative)

One morning a child looks out the window and discovers that a huge castle has appeared overnight. The child rushes outside to the castle and hears strange sounds coming from it. Someone is living in the castle! The castle door creaks open. The child goes in. Write a story about who the child meets and what happens inside the castle.

Example Topic 2 : Interesting Dream (Descriptive)

Think about a happy, funny, or weird dream that you've had. It can be a dream that you just had or from when you were much younger. Describe this dream. Include everything that you saw, heard, and did. Also include how you felt during it.

In writing this type of essays, 4th graders are supposed to use their own imagination and draw on their own experiences, which is typical of subjective essays.

In contrast, social essay topics can be found in some of the compare-and-contrast type essays. The following is from the 6th grade category :

Example Topic 3 : Books vs. Movies (Compare and Contrast)

Books and movies are both used to tell stories. Write an essay comparing books to movies. How are the two methods of telling stories alike? How are they different? Remember to include examples to support your points.

In this topic, students are required to give more objective views. Discussion of similarities and differences between how books and movies tell stories is rarely subject to individual differences in opinions.

However, some topics have both personal and social elements, in which case they are categorized as socio-personal (abbreviated as SP in Table 1). Look at the following example :

Example Topic 4 : Non-School Clothes (Descriptive)

Do you have clothes that you wear for different activities? Are they play clothes or special-event clothes? Do the clothes show that you are a member of a group? Choose one set of clothes. Write an essay describing these clothes. Explain what they look like and how they feel and how you feel wearing them. What activities do you enjoy while wearing these clothes?

Example 4 requires students to choose a type of clothes and describe how they look like (objective) and how students feel when wearing them (subjective). The next section will analyze persuasive essays provided in *Criterion*[®], using the distinction between subjectivity (personal) and objectivity (social).

4. Analyses

This section examines topics in the persuasive-essay category from the 4th grade to the GRE level, firstly by categorizing them into personal, social, and socio-personal types. Then, it discusses some other characteristics that are useful for examining persuasive-type essays.

4.1. Personal, Social and Socio-Personal

When the dichotomy of personal and social topics is applied to persuasive topics, more social topics will be found in the persuasive-essay category than other categories such as narrative topics because of the nature of persuasive essays. Topics of persuasive essays, which are opinion-based and often aimed at convincing others to accept your ideas, are more likely to be related to general public interest or at least to people in your community. However, there are some topics that are categorized as personal in the persuasive type. The following is an excerpt from the 4th grade level topics.

Example 5 : Choose a Pet (Persuasive)

Many people have a pet such as a dog, bird, or snake. If you could have any pet, what would you choose? Describe the pet you would want and give three reasons for your choice.

To deal with this essay topic, you are supposed to make a choice and provide any subjective, personal reasons for the choice, without regard for any moral or practical considerations to others, which make this topic a truly personal-persuasive type.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is a purely social topic. The following is an example again from the 4th grade :

Example 6 : Dog Park (Persuasive)

A new park is about to open in the neighborhood. Some of the people want the park to be “dog-friendly.” They want a place where owners can take their dogs and let their dogs play without wearing leashes. Other people want the park to require leashes on dogs at all times. What do you think? Why? Write an essay to convince readers that your position is correct.

In this essay, elementary school children are supposed to state their positions more objectively since readers are unlikely to be convinced by personal reasons alone.

The above two examples indicate the need to define more clearly the characteristics of social and personal topics in discussing persuasive essays, which often have writers evaluate the value of something. Personal topics are related to personal benefits that include benefits to oneself and somebody close to him/her as in Example 5, while social topics are related to the common good of society, or social benefits, as in Example 6. In dealing with Example 5, writers can give personal reasons, for example, the fact that their favorite animals are cute, fluffy, or congenial. In contrast, it is essential for writers to give convincing logical reasons in Example 6. Possible arguments for required leashes on pets would be that it would ensure the safety of park visitors, or prevent possible fights between dogs. Arguments against it would be to discuss pets’ physical and mental benefits of running freely without any constraints around their neck or body. In any case, the topic is unrelated to writers’ preferences or benefits.

In fact, it is pointed out in some essay writing training books that it is essential to recognize whether you are required to express personal opinions or discuss some issues based on factual analyses. For example, if a topic asks you whether you prefer to cook and eat at home, or eat at restaurants, you can discuss your preferences, mentioning whether or not you like to cook, and which is more convenient for you, depending on your circumstances. Probably your choice varies depending on whether you live alone or with your family, whether you are leading a hectic or relaxing life, and whether you live in a city or in a rural area. On the other hand, if a topic asks you which is better, cooking and eating at home or eating at restaurants, you need to make an argument based on more general merit-analysis which can be applied to the general public. For example, in order to support eating at home, you need to discuss the issue by arguing that it is more expensive to eat out, or it is generally less healthy to eat out because restaurants often use a lot of salt and oils to make their dishes more appetizing to customers. In order to express objectivity, you need to be careful which pronouns to use. The first singular pronoun should be avoided in social topics because they are commonly used in personal topics, and the second plural pronoun “you” or the first plural pronoun “we,” or “people”—all of which refer to the general public—are predominantly used in social topics.

The dichotomy of personal and social topics is complicated by the presence of the “hybrid” type, or the socio-personal type, in persuasive essays. In addition, it is noteworthy that this type has varying degrees of “personal topic” and “social topic” elements. Let us analyze examples that illuminate the complexity of topic contents. One example is from the 5th grade level :

Example 7 : Person for a Stamp (Persuasive)

A lot of famous or important people have had their faces on postage stamps. Who would you nominate to appear on new stamp? Why do you admire this person? Why should they be recognized in this way? Offer specific support for your choice.

The topic above requires the writer to make his/her own personal choice (as indicated by “would you nominate” or “admire”), which can be personal. However, to support your choice for people for stamps, reasons should have some social implications. Figures on stamps can reflect the cultural values of a country, or they should have some reputable characteristics so that they can serve as role models for people. This topic, which has both personal and social elements, is categorized as a 50% personal and 50% social topic. Other examples of this “balanced” hybrid type include topics that require the writer to persuade someone you think will be a president material to take up presidency, or to explain why people should do your favorite exercise, and to persuade judges in a contest that you can be a good principal-for-a-day.

However, the degree of “social-ness” can be lower in some socio-personal topics. Look at the following example from the 6th level :

Example 8 : Cafeteria Foods (Persuasive)

You eat lunch in your school cafeteria almost every day. The food is good, but you wish your favorite food was on the menu. Write a persuasive letter to the school’s cafeteria telling them about your favorite food and convincing them to put it on the menu. Be sure to use specific reasons and examples to explain why this particular food belongs on the menu.

This topic is similar to Example 7 in that it requires the writer to make his/her own choice and convince others to accept his/her idea. However, in order to convince the cafeteria staff, students can give a reason that is not beneficial to the school. For instance, they can argue for including some junk food in the menu by citing its popularity among teenagers and the economic benefits to the cafeteria. Even though you can argue for a healthy menu stating its health benefits, the possibility of argument from non-socially beneficial perspectives makes this topic categorized as socio-personal topics of lower degree “social-ness.” Topics that belong to this category are “generally personal” socio-personal topics.

People involved in this type of topics, namely, those to be persuaded, also serve as one of the criteria for judging the personal/social dichotomy (plus one, socio-personal). When you try to persuade one of your friends, or your parents, the topic is likely to be personal, because it only involves somebody close to you. Your argument for or against the topic is not necessarily for social benefits. The topic is categorized as social when you try to make persuasive arguments to a considerably large number of people such as your classmates, students in your school, or people in your local community. When you try to convince people to do something whose decision can have a profound influence on public interest, such as your school principal or the government, it is again considered the social category.

To sum up, standards by which to classify persuasive essay topics into personal, social, or socio-personal are as follows : If your choice is based on subjectivity, whether it is a choice between two options or from many options, or a good-or-bad dichotomy, it is considered to have a personal element. When your choice is supported from the objective points of view, then is it considered to have a social element. If topics are not concerned about social benefits or of no/little social significance, they are considered “personal,” whereas if they are, they are considered “social.” When there are both of the two elements in topics, they are categorized as socio-personal.

4.2. Results

The following table shows the numbers of personal, socio-personal, social topics in each grade.

Table 1 Personal / Socio-Personal / Social Topics

grades (right) / features (below)	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th	C Pre	C I G	C I BF	C II G	C II BF	TFL	Giss
P	4 57%	0	1 17%	1 17%	1 13%	0	0	0	0	0	1 2%	1 5%	2 2%	0	5 24%	0
SP	1 14%	4 67%	4 67%	4 67%	2 25%	2 29%	1 14%	2 29%	0	0	2 5%	0	2 2%	2 10%	1 5%	0
S	2 29%	2 33%	1 17%	1 17%	5 63%	5 71%	6 86%	5 71%	9 100%	2 100%	38 93%	19 95%	40 91%	18 90%	15 71%	8 100%
total	7 100%	6 100%	6 100%	6 100%	8 100%	7 100%	7 100%	7 100%	9 100%	2 100%	41 100%	20 100%	44 100%	20 100%	21 100%	8 100%

C Pre—College Preparatory

C I G—College I General

C I BF—College I Business-focused

C II G—College II General

C II BF—College II Business-focused

TFL—TOEFL

Giss—GRE issue

Although the total numbers of persuasive essays from the Grade 4 to the College Preparatory are small, they clearly indicate the transition from personal topics to social topics with the advancement of the grade. At the 4th grade, more than half of the essays are personal topics, with social topics accounting for almost 30% and socio-personal about 14%. From the 5th grade through the 7th grade, the distribution patterns are similar, with socio-personal topics accounting for two-thirds. The 5th grade has no personal topics, while the 6th and 7th grades have one topic for the personal and the social category (one for each). From the 8th grade to the 11th, the social category accounts for the largest part (63%, 71%, 86%, 71%, respectively), whereas at the 12th level and the College Preparatory level, there is only one category: social topics.

The four levels at higher education except the GRE issue (College I General, College I Business-focused, College II General, College II Business-focused) have a larger number of topics in total (41, 20, 44, 20 respectively) which are predominantly social (93%, 95%, 91%, 90% respectively). Eight topics in the GRE issue level, which is for graduate-level education, are all social topics. The TOEFL level has a higher percentage of personal topics (24%) than the other higher educational levels. This is probably because the *TOEFL*[®] test, designed for non-native speakers of English in pursuit of college level education in English, provides a larger number of less demanding personal topics compared to more challenging social topics.

The table above clearly shows that writing topics lead students from personal matters to issues of social significance with the advancement of the grade. Topics with social elements range from school-related activities including classroom activities and extracurricular activities to education, political, and economic issues. Topics discussed here seem to reflect students' life and interests, but also make them more aware of the benefits of their social surroundings by having them make a case about an issue in question.

4.3. Other Features

In addition to the distinction between personal and social elements, there are other notable characteristics typical of persuasive essays. These features show that higher level writing with advancing grade requires a higher level of logical/critical thinking as well as intellectual sophistication and maturity. This section discusses three of these features.

4.3.1. Value Judgment

With the advancement of grades toward higher education, naturally and inevitably students are given more challenging essay topics. One of the key ingredients is value judgment that is required in some persuasive topics in higher education. First of all, let us look at the definition of the term. Dictionaries have different definitions. For example, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines it as "a judgment about how good or important something is, based on personal opinions

rather than facts.” According to *the New Oxford American Dictionary*, it is “an assessment of something as good or bad in terms of one’s standards or priorities.” The following definition from *BusinessDictionary.com* probably gives the gist of this term : “Subjective assessment that a behavior, object, person, principle, etc., is good or bad or something is ought to or not ought to happen.” Value judgments “involve aesthetical, ethical, ideological, moral, theological and other interpretations and cannot be reduced to arguable statements of fact.” In other words, value judgment is a subjective assessment that is beyond the simple statement of facts or simple merit-analysis based on practicality. In fact, Matsumoto (2010) regards topics involving value judgment as the most challenging type of topics in debating, which is more difficult than discussing simple facts and possible solutions. Generally, topics that concern human rights and animal rights, life and death, tradition versus innovation, and the key ingredient of success and happiness are typical topics that involve value judgments.

Though every judgment involves some kind of subjective assessments, some topics need to be discussed based on philosophical thinking at higher levels. The following are examples from the GRE category that require writers to present their perspective on the issues, using relevant reasons and/or examples.

Example 9 : “The best ideas arise from a passionate interest in commonplace things.”

Example 10 : “It is important for higher education to challenge established traditions and values.”

Example 11 : “Wisdom is rightfully attributed not to people who know what to look for in life but to people who know what to ignore.”

When you discuss these topics, you need to start with the examination of the issue based on your values and priorities in life, rather than analyze the merits or demerits of something. Furthermore, you need to base your discussion on your subjective assessments that require wisdom, intellectual maturity, and philosophical thinking. Thus, these topics are not categorized as personal topics as shown in the previous section.

It is difficult to clearly identify which essay topics require this type of subjective assessment, because discussions of good-or-bad judgment, should-or-shouldn’t-do judgment, or importance/value of something basically entail some kind of value judgments. However, as a tentative analysis, essay topics whose arguments are almost exclusively based on value judgment and cannot be discussed from practical/objective statements of fact are categorized as essay topics which require value judgment (“VJ” in Table 2). Only topics that require a high degree of value judgment as shown in the above examples are considered to have VJ. Table 2 shows that there are some topics of this type in College I General (4), College II General (3), TOEFL (1), and GRE (6). The reason why there are no such topics in the College I and II business

Table 2 Other Features of Persuasive Essays

grades (right) / features (below)	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th	C Pre	C I G	C I BF	C II G	C II BF	TFL	Giss
VJ											4 10%		3 7%		1 5%	6 75%
STR	1 14%	1 17%	2 33%	0	2 25%	3 43%	2 29%	1 14%	1 11%	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
DQ											12 29%	0	21 48%	2 10%		
total	7	6	6	6	8	7	7	7	9	2	41	20	44	20	21	8

C Pre—College Preparatory

C I G —College I General

C I BF—College I Business-focused

C II G—College II General

C II BF—College II Business-focused

TFL—TOEFL

Giss—GRE issue

Gar—GRE argument

-focused levels would be that the business world often requires us to focus on practicality and merit.

4.3.2. Specific Target Readers

Another noteworthy point is the presence of a specific target reader that is to be persuaded from the elementary level to the high school levels. In some persuasive essays, students are required to write an essay or letter to persuade teachers, classmates, the editor of a magazine, or community members to accept their ideas.

The numbers in the “STR” (“specific target reader”) in Table 2 show a general tendency that a target reader is specified to facilitate writing of persuasive essays in a larger percentage of essays at the lower grade levels and a smaller percentage at the high school although the grade 6th and the 9th levels are exceptions to this tendency. There are no specified target readers in the levels of higher education. The purpose of specifying a target reader is probably to allow students to come up with more specific ways to make their argument persuasive like providing assisted wheels on bicycles to children. Students need some guidance on how to write persuasive essays just as children need to practice riding a bicycle with assisted wheels before they can maneuver a proper bicycle. However, in order to explain the anomalies of the higher rates of specific target readers in the 6th and 9th levels, more detailed analyses will be needed and left open for future study.

4.3.3. “Degree Questions”

Finally, it is worth noting that the ways of giving essay directions vary according to different levels. Until the high school level, many topics often tell students/writers to take either of two sides, exemplified in such phrases as “do you agree or disagree” with a certain statement, “do you think something is a good idea or a bad idea,” or “do you think X should do or not,” while, in college levels, students are often required to give their opinions based on the “degree question,” as in “to what extent do you agree or disagree” with a certain statement. The number of topics of this type is shown in “DQ” (“degree question”) column in Table 2. This tendency shows that students at the college level are required to provide more sophisticated discussions because non-dualistic degree-type arguments require a more holistic approach to thinking about the issue. The GRE topics require students to present their perspectives on the issue, exercising their higher level of intelligence. TOEFL topics are similar to those for high school students probably because they are made less demanding for non-native speakers of English. On College business-focused levels, non-degree type questions are used probably in consideration of business settings, which often require clear decision making processes.

5. Conclusion

This paper analyzed persuasive essays in *Criterion*[®], by categorizing each topic into the personal, socio-personal, or personal categories. The analysis based on this criterion revealed that a higher percentage of social topics are found in higher grades. The other features of essays discussed in this paper are (1) a high/less degree of value judgment required, (2) the presence/absence of specific target readers, and (3) degree/non-degree questions. To sum up, college and graduate level essay writing involves a higher ratio of social topics and requires a high level of value judgments, more holistic arguments and abstract philosophical thinking based on intellectual maturity with no specific target readers to be persuaded.

In order to examine what writing skills are needed and how essay writing topics can develop or assess students’ writing skills, it is necessary to analyze topics of other categories, which will be dealt with in my future research. Research that covers all the topic categories will reveal effective ways to prepare non-native speakers of English to write English essays logically and coherently.

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